

Ambulance Fee Heads To A Vote

Court of Appeals rules in favor of putting referendum on ballot

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Come November, Montgomery County voters will decide the fate of ambulance fees and possibly risk the loss of \$12.9 million in county revenue, according to County Executive Isiah "Ike" Leggett (D).

The Maryland Court of Appeals decided last week in a 5-2 vote that county residents should have a voter referendum on the charge, officially known as the EMS Transport Fee. The move also reverses the decision by local election officials to reject thousands of petition signatures brought in by local rescue and firefighter groups because they were illegible or the name did not match the registered voter name.

"It's a victory for democracy as well as a victory for common sense," Councilman Phil Andrews (D-Dist. 3) said.

Under the proposed legislation, county residents' insurance companies would be charged between \$300 and \$800 for an ambulance ride, depending on distance. Leggett said uninsured residents would not be required to pay the fee, but non-county residents are on the hook for any cost not covered by their insurance companies. Of course, if citizens do vote down the ambulance fee, there will be repercussions in the fiscal year 2010 county budget, Leggett said, to make up for the \$12.9 million that was already factored in to come from the adoption of the ambulance fee. According to Leggett, those consequences the destaffing of 11 emergency vehicles, cuts in ambulance services and laying off dozens of fire and rescue workers.

"The county is one of the only few that still pays the cost of transporting patients to the hospital," Leggett said.

"If that revenue doesn't come from there, then we have to turn around and reduce the budget by \$12.9 million during this fiscal year," county representative Patrick Lacefield said. "And that decision will also affect our future budgets in the years to come."

For the volunteer firefighters who helped collect nearly 53,000 signatures during the petition process, the victory is short-lived for the issue to be put on the ballot. According to Leggett's latest proposal, volunteer firefighters could be facing budget cuts of more than \$1 million in administrative and other costs.

"The court's decision is an important victory in that it will give county residents to have a voice on whether to impose ambulance fees in Montgomery County," said Kenneth Yazge, president of the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Rescue Services. "We believe ambulance fees may deter calls to 911 when help is needed most, will drive up insurance costs and wrongfully impose a fee for an essential government service."

Yazge said his firefighters will be educating voters over the next few weeks about how the fee works exactly and how it will affect them in the long term.

“We oppose charging a fee for a service that is often provided by volunteer personnel for free,” Yazge said.

“The court has spoken,” Leggett said. “We would have to make up the revenue in millions of dollars of cuts. It would be across the board, and it includes everything from libraries to recreation to fire and rescue services itself, which is the ironic part.”